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Hot Air Balloons

Abigail Benoit

They live in a small house in central Nebraska. There is a ladder leading up to the door because the stairs caved in awhile back, and so to get inside they have to climb three rungs up, fiddle with the stupid key that always sticks in the stupid lock, and swing one leg into the hallway, while at the same time grabbing onto a small notch in the side wall to steady themselves. Once, she'd fallen off trying to pull the stupid key out of the stupid lock and sprained her stupid ankle.

After the short fall off the rusty ladder, she'd lain there in the October mud, waiting for him to come home and help her. She could have braced herself, pushed herself onto her elbows, and her hands, and then positioned her good foot under her and stood up. But she didn't really want to, so she stayed there and waited quietly, looking at the sky.

He came home awhile later, slowly walking up the uneven gravel pathway that led to the house. He saw her lying there and wondered how long it had been, and whether or not she was actually hurt. But she called his name, and though she sounded more sentient than usual, he put a hand on his briefcase, and kept walking, and sighed.

He wonders why they still live together. She is a mess.

After they arrived home from the hospital, he helped her through the side door, the one that was overgrown with prickly weeds and screeched loudly when opened. She dropped her crutches and stood on one foot, grabbing clumsily for his neck. He kicked the door open and carried her to the living room. He tossed the orange bottle of generic Vicodin at her—it rattled, landing just in front of the couch where she was resting. She stuck her arm out, waved it around mildly, and looked at him. He said something along the lines of get it yourself and went into the bedroom to lie down.

She was walking again two weeks later, all on her own. He could tell because the wallpaper was peeling in various places around the house—not the gently swirling corners that unglue themselves because of an especially humid summer, but little scrapes here and there that left the paper hanging off the wall, curling in midair. One corner of the kitchen looked like a dingy beige ribbon, yanked through scissors again and again. He asked her if she knew what happened, and she said she didn't, that she'd been on the couch the whole time.

He looks at himself in the mirror and wonders when he became so old. He remembers playing Little League baseball, and buying his first car. He remembers being in second grade, learning about turtles and math, when he looked out the window and saw something. At first he thought it was a small bird, or maybe a bat, trying to find its way south. He kept watching the birdbat, wanting to know what it truly was, when his teacher told him to pay attention or else, so he turned toward the blackboard and forgot about it forever. He remembers every birthday party he ever had.

Their first conversation was about time. Or more specifically, time zones. They talked about how in Nebraska is split into two time zones, Mountain and Central, and

sometimes if you leave from one and drive a short distance to the other the hour catches up with you and it's like the drive never even happened—you can just go about the day savoring every extra minute. She liked the way that felt; he didn't.

Indiana also has two time zones, she said. She knew because she lived there once, and had a big dog named Rabbit and a pair of long-divorced parents, with whom Rabbit divided his time. She moved to Nebraska after college because she wanted to be closer to an ocean; the lakes had begun to bore her with their lack of salt and she liked colorful fish. She didn't like television.

She moved into his small house after three months of coffee shop talks and movie nights. Daily, he set the kitchen table with fresh flowers, and he always kissed her goodbye before he went to work. He lined one full bedroom wall with mirrors because she asked him to. He sometimes would arrive home to see her sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of the mirrored wall, slowly closing one eye and then the other, checking whether or not they were still symmetrical. He always pretended not to notice, quickly walking to the other side of the room and rustling around in the closet until he knew that she was gone.

For a few months, he used to race around the office to get all his files done as fast as possible, scribbling and calculating and recalculating, putting stamps on envelopes and rapidly emailing. More than once he mixed up wrong names with other accounts, and sometimes even dialed the wrong phone number, but he always apologized cheerfully and never once became frustrated. When he finally finished, he would put all his folders in his briefcase and snap it closed and drive home, speeding along the almost-empty roads and constantly checking the rearview mirror to see if he still looked okay. He pulled into the driveway; she would either be outside gardening or looking through the big front window, and when he opened the car door and stepped onto the gravel, she came running out to him and they would hug and hug and hug.

He wonders what happened. He thinks maybe things were always this way and he just never noticed. He feels tricked, as if his life has been one gigantic lie. It is very late, and he decides to go to sleep.

He had never lived by himself before. He lived with his parents until he went away to college, save for an extremely short-lived plan concocted with one of his friends to camp outside for a whole summer. But they didn't really know what to do with the long-lasting daylight hours, and so he moved back. Later, he went away to college. Though it wasn't really away, because the school was still very close to his home. But he did go. He lived in a dorm his freshman and sophomore years, once with a boy who got stoned every day and played an excessive amount of video games, once with a kid he doesn't really remember. For his third year, he decided to move in with two people he knew from high school.

He majored in business and sometimes went on dates. During his last year, he lived alone. When he left school, he lived with his parents again until he saved up enough money to move out. They helped him look for a place to become self-sustainable, and as soon as he saw the little house in the middle of the big empty field, he knew. He'd never been so glad to live in Nebraska in his entire life. The down payment was barely an issue, and even if he'd known in advance that he would have to sleep on the cold hardwood floor for a while, he would have done it the same way.

And he did sleep on the floor, for more than a while. He worked and worked and worked, weekdays and weekends alike. He had nothing else to do, and he needed the money. He wanted a bed and lots of dishes and a soft rug for the dark wood of the floor, but so far all his money had gone to the house and the car payments, with very little left for frivolities. He started to grow a beard.

He wakes in the middle of the night. She is not there.

In the summer, one morning they made pancakes. The flour and the butter and the eggs and the milk and the blueberries were already on the counter when he woke up, and she was sitting at the round kitchen table wearing a dress that matched the tablecloth almost perfectly. He reached into various cabinets, removing mixing bowls and pans. He opened and closed drawers trying to find the whisk, then gave up and used a fork instead. He broke the eggs first into a coffee mug, where he then checked for any flakes of shell that might have landed in the batter. If he saw any, he removed them carefully with a fork, and then poured the remaining contents of the mug on top of the flour. She laughed every few minutes and ate the darkest blueberries.

They are the same age, though he feels much older.

After the pancakes, they sat on the front stairs with mugs of cold black tea and talked for awhile. She wanted a puppy. She said she was lonely when he was at work, and didn't know what to do, and that if there was a puppy she'd have someone to talk to. He told her to make friends, to go into town and make friends, and that she's very likable. He really didn't want a dog chewing on the new carpet; she knew that she really wasn't very likable.

He had just finished making his brand new bed and was excited to finally be off the floor, when he remembered that he promised his boss he would work extra hard in the upcoming week to make up for his advance. He sat on the bed briefly, then drove to work. It was a Saturday, so nobody else was around. Usually, the office consisted of four men. Each of them had a corner, and each was the boss of somebody else in the room. The main boss was the secondary boss's boss, the secondary boss was the new boss's boss, the new boss was his direct supervisor, and he was the boss of nobody. Sometimes he would fantasize about becoming the boss of someone, rotating corners like a game of four square, but for the most part he enjoyed having others tell him what to do. And although he felt his years of schooling going to waste, he was almost sure the menial labor he was performing was of some service to somebody, somewhere.

On the porch, he smiled and looked at her dress, covered with little red and blue chickens, and told her he loved her. She said that she wanted to own a bakery someday, a bakery specializing in crême puffs and croissants, and kissed him on the cheek. He thought about asking her if she was happy, but instead decided to lift her up and spin her around in the tall grass of what was now their front yard. Her dress flared up from the motion. She felt like a ballerina.

He wonders if there even is such a thing as true love, or if people just want to

believe in it badly enough that they go so far as to trick themselves into thinking subpar, completely incompatible relationships can be shaped into something different, something better.

He came home from work one night in December, late. The drive home had been snowy, and the windshield kept fogging up, so he drove very slowly. He found her in the bathtub, naked and shivering. The room was completely dark, but there were glow-in-the-dark stars stuck all over the walls and mirror and ceiling and even in the sink that hadn't been there before. He reached for the light-switch but couldn't find it. He panicked and grabbed her shoulder and pulled her toward him. ARE YOU OKAY? he yelled, shaking her a little. She looked at him through the dark and asked him to get her some blankets and told him she loved him very much and also weren't the stars beautiful?

He decides on the latter.

The happiest he'd ever seen her was the very first spring they'd spent together. They were at an aquarium in a city about an hour away. She'd never been to an aquarium before, and when he found this out he made up his mind to take her. She brought a picnic basket and they drove the miles to Lincoln, and he bought two tickets and they walked in holding hands. For some reason he cannot place, this moment in his life reminds him of the hot air balloons.

He thinks about all the people he never called back and also if they miss him. He is sorry for not returning any of his parents' attempts to communicate. He misses them.

When he was a very young child, he was interested in the sky. He drew clouds. He used prisms and sunlight to create rainbows on the white walls of his room. His mother painted the ceiling of his bedroom a bright, light blue, and when he came home from school that day and saw his new ceiling he beamed with joy. He didn't even bother to tell her that the sky was, in fact, NOT light blue—he would just lie on the floor and stare at that ceiling for hours and imagine what was up there. He looks back on this as if it were yesterday.

There is one day he remembers more clearly than all the rest. It was autumn, and she was in the backyard when he woke up, and on this particular day, he decided not to go to work. He went out to join her and realized she was flying a kite shaped like a bat. They looked at each other as she walked in lazy circles around their field of tall grasses and scattered vegetation. The bat rippled in the wind. He stared at the kite, followed its every mesmerizing swoop and dip with his eyes. Then its string snapped in half and it was scooped up in the air. She grabbed her end of string as it fell from the sky and sprinted toward the direction in which the bat seemed to be flying.

He wanted to shout at her, to ask what the FUCK are you doing? for once but he looked up to find the bat and saw something better. It was hundreds of hot air balloons. They were of all shapes, sizes, colors, patterns, and they swept across the sky, blocking out the majority of the sunlight while they passed. He started waving softly, knowing there was no way anyone could see him from that height. He waved for a minute, then started to run

and jump, brandishing his arms in the air and screaming things like HEEY UP THERE!!! and HELLOOO!! He kept running until his lungs burned and he screamed until he felt his throat becoming raw and bloody, and he waved until the last balloon disappeared and the sun shone brightly again.

When he finally went back to the house that night, after chasing the hot air balloons, he took a hot shower. His skin turned red and he decided to paint. The picture he painted that night took him seven hours to complete, and it now hangs on the wall facing the couch in the living room, substituting for the television they never had. It's oranges and yellows and hot pinks over a deep, sky blue. The field is there, and there are some pumpkins dotting it, although in reality they do not have any pumpkins, only some types squash and a few faltering, speckled corn stalks. There is a small speck of black in the very top right-hand corner, and right below that speck is the silhouette of a person. She is on her knees, sobbing, looking at the sky. But one would never know that simply by viewing the painting. It hangs slightly downward and to the left.

He stands in front of the mirror again and he remembers the day he flew home from the office to see her splayed across the crumbling stairs, her thin, pale legs reaching toward the house and her head lolling off the second to last step. Her long brown hair was stretching toward the street like so many stringy legs on a jellyfish, tangled in knots. One shoe was dangling off her foot, and the other was lodged somewhere in an overgrown bush nearby. But he didn't see the shoe hiding in the bush, and he didn't feel the shards of gravel poking into his flimsy shoes. Instead he inhaled sharply, the breath getting caught in his throat. He dropped his briefcase—all his papers scattered wildly in the wind, yellow and white and smudged eraser marks and red ink. He ran the rest of the way to the porch, all the way to the stairs, and she sat up and smiled and said hello.